

Challenging the Narcissistic Mother: *About narcissistic mothers and their daughters in the stories "Apples from the Desert" and "Crying on Mother's Shoulder" by Savyon Liebrecht*

Revital Shiri-Horowitz, Dr. Ofra Matzov Cohen

Received: 25 Jun 2021; Received in revised form: 11 Jul 2021; Accepted: 22 Jul 2021; Available online: 06 Aug 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This article examines the complex relationships between daughters and their narcissistic mothers in two short stories by Savyon Liebrecht: "Apples from the Desert" (1986) and "Crying on Mother's Shoulder" (2006). These stories adopt a model different from the familiar characterization of the mother as benevolent, who treats her children with devotion, unconditional love, and empowerment while sacrificing her own needs. The analysis of Liebrecht's stories through the psychological theory of maternal narcissism confirms the claim that her characters suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. Using a dramatic design, Liebrecht reveals the psychological dynamics that take place in the stories and depicts a process of painful disillusionment, rebellion and defiance in the daughters' attempts to establish independent adult lives.

Keywords— The theme of motherhood in fiction, mother-daughter relationships in Hebrew literature, Savyon Liebrecht, maternal narcissism, personality disorder.

Many authors apply psychological theories in their writing. This is generally an intuitive process based on an understanding of human nature, rather than on detailed knowledge of the characteristics of a particular disorder (Blumrosen-Sela, 2017). Psychological theories provide us with a framework with which we can understand the motives of the characters in a literary work. The stories of Savyon Liebrecht, for example, illustrate the principles of maternal narcissism. Using this theory to frame an approach to her work provides a deeper understanding of the stories, the motives and behavior of the maternal characters, and their daughters' responses--- who may be blindly obedient or who may distance themselves, or even challenge their mothers and everything they represent. We will begin by briefly examining these theories.

Narcissus, the well-known figure in Greek mythology, sought love. Although men and women fell desperately in love with him, he did not love them back---

instead, he fell in love with his reflection (Ovid, 1881). Freud coined the term "narcissism" in the early twentieth century to refer to the healthy developmental stage of the young child who concentrates only on himself and cannot see the other until a later stage (Freud, 1914). Narcissism was later recognized as a type of borderline personality disorder. In the 1960s, Kohut and Kernberg coined the term, "narcissistic personality disorder" (NPD), which was entered in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in the 1980s (APA, 2013).

In the last fifty years, many researchers have studied narcissism by examining its symptoms, as well as the impact narcissists have had on the people around them (Kernberg, 1985). Narcissistic personality disorder has several salient features: obsessive preoccupation with the self, the constant need for admiration, endless

preoccupation with imaginary successes, lack of empathy, jealousy, desire for control, manipulateness and lack of boundaries. Narcissistic personalities believe that they are special and that only superior individuals can understand them. Narcissism exists on a broad spectrum and the intensity of its characteristics varies from person to person (Lester, 2019).

Is the borderline personality disorder of narcissism hereditary or acquired? What are the chances of daughters of narcissistic mothers being narcissistic as well? The research is inconclusive as it is difficult to separate genetic and environmental factors and measure them accurately. There is strong evidence that there is indeed a genetic component, but to date, no specific gene has been identified. However, environmental factors are also highly significant. The concept "narcissistic legacy" has been used to refer to the combined effect of genetic and environmental influences (Luo 2018). The narcissistic legacy may pass from mother to daughter, although it is possible to block its passage if the daughter is strong, resilient, and able to reject the values on which she was raised (Määttä et al., 2020).

In a family with a narcissistic mother, each member of the family has a defined role: the "successful child" is considered the mother's favorite, while the "black sheep" is blamed for all of the family's problems, causing all of the family's negative emotions to flow to him (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1997). All of the members of the household enable the family's narcissistic behavior or are narcissists themselves. The goal of the narcissistic mother is to rule over the family and induce each member to maintain their prescribed role in the family according to the structure she has established (Masterson, 2013).

Mothers are supposed to help the child negotiate their place in the world, teach them love, giving, empathy and instill in them a sense of confidence. Daughters of narcissistic mothers, however, never receive healthy maternal support because these mothers can only see their daughters as a reflection of themselves. They use their daughters to fulfill their own needs, and above all, to feel good about themselves. They inflict narcissistic abuse, which manifests itself as rigid control and shaming. Narcissistic mothers are never happy with their daughters; they can never be good enough. The daughters' true identity is rejected time and time again until they are shamed into feeling that they are unworthy of love. As a result of their mothers' limited ability to be attentive to them and give them love, they are unable to recognize and value their own feelings (Martinez-Lewi, 2013).

In Liebrecht's stories, the daughters of narcissistic mothers are not narcissistic themselves but are the victims of maternal narcissism and its effects. The damage is so profound that they find it very difficult to disobey or break away from their mothers or choose an independent path in life. Their pain reflects various issues discussed in the psychological literature.

Karyl McBride was one of the first psychologists to focus on the impact of narcissistic mothers on their daughters in her book *Will I Ever Be Good Enough* (2008). McBride outlines the mother's attitude towards her daughter in light of the following narcissistic characteristics. The *grandiose mother* talks only about herself and has no real interest in her daughter. When talking to friends, she will only talk about her successes and ignore the daughter who is standing next to her. The *self-important mother* believes that she is "special" and deserves preferential treatment. She will constantly demand admiration and respect from her daughter, and expect appreciation for all she has done for her. The *deserving mother* feels privileged and demeans and embarrasses her daughter. The *exploitative mother* communicates to her daughter that she should only cultivate people who can provide her with favors instead of relating to them as human beings. The *unempathetic mother* revises and corrects her daughter's words, refusing to affirm her daughter's feelings. *Jealous mothers* (or mothers who think others are jealous of them) project their feelings onto others teaching their daughters that there are no true friendships because all women are jealous of her. *Rude mothers* block friendships because their children are too good to play with other children.

McBride (2008) enumerates how the daughter may be affected by the behavior of the narcissistic mother. She calls it "the ten stingers" (2008, pp. 19-35). The daughter understands that she is "not good enough;" neither her looks, her intelligence nor her behavior. Her feelings are less important than the image her mother creates for her. She suffers from low self-esteem. The mother is jealous of the teenage daughter who is developing into a woman. The mother is threatened by anything that prevents her from occupying center stage; the daughter must not be too beautiful nor too smart. The mother constantly judges her daughter and undermines her self-confidence. The daughter suffers from a lack of boundaries and a lack of privacy. Her experience of her private world is vague. Even personal items, such as underwear, do not feel private. The mother is unable to cope with her feelings; she projects them onto her daughter, treats her like a friend, without filters, and relies on her to satisfy her needs. The daughter's perception of reality is weakened. The mother acts manipulatively to

achieve what she wants and to be at the center. She challenges the daughter's sense of reality by suggesting that she is lying or dramatizing: "you are imagining," "you didn't see it," "you didn't hear it," "you are exaggerating." The daughter learns that she is not important and suppresses her desires and feelings. The mother is not empathetic and does not acknowledge her daughter's feelings. When her daughter has difficulties, the mother abandons her—her love is conditional.

As we shall see below, some of these characteristics are reflected in Savyon Liebrecht's stories. In both stories, the mothers are characterized as suffering from this personality disorder, causing the girl to experience the deep trauma which has had such a decisive impact on their lives. In addition to portraying these difficulties, the stories describe the daughters' ways of coping. A significant psychological turning point occurs in the daughters' lives when they breakout of the cycle of the narcissistic legacy by rebelling against societal values and defying their mothers' expectations.

LITERATURE AND PSYCHOLOGY: THE CASE OF SAVYON LIEBRECHT

The writer and the psychologist have much in common. Each describes and analyzes human experience using language, finding or inventing linguistic and narrative structures that define the experience and delimit its boundaries (Coetzee & Kurtz, 2015). Savyon Liebrecht's stories illustrate the encounter between the worlds of the writer and the psychologist, particularly those dealing with narcissistic parental behavior. Indeed, her portrayal of this borderline personality disorder has established her singular place in the psychological world of modern Hebrew literature.

The psychological conflicts that Liebrecht portrays also reflect the cultural conditioning that shapes the mother-daughter relationship.¹ The mother is expected to act as a benefactor while the daughter is expected to feel indebted and grateful. Mothers perform a socially defined role to which their daughters strive to respond. Liebrecht's stories reflect a different kind of motherhood. These are mothers who do not support their daughters; instead, they impose their expectations on them out of their own narcissistic needs. This dynamic ultimately leads the girls to painful disillusionment and acts of resistance.

¹See Dana Olmert's book *KeHoma Anudna*, which traces the changes that the maternal figure has undergone in fiction in relation to social and cultural changes in Israeli society (Dana Olmert, "Kechoma Amodna: Imahot Le'chayalim Basifrut Ha'ivrit" [A Barricade of Mothers: Mothers of Soldiers in Zionist Culture and Literature, 2018])

The stories rec all basic psychological patterns of mother-daughter relationships familiar from children's fairy tales. By adopting psychoanalytic model of personality, we see that children's fairy tales contribute to the child's emotional development by communicating both conscious and subconscious messages and letting go of the ego and the superego. Fairy tales play an important role in the child's psychology. They allow the child to identify with and learn about the adult world as well as to understand situations that are relevant to his life (Bettelheim, 1994).

Many modern literary works deal with the human psyche and its psychological complexity by referencing or evoking the world of fairy tales. *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, for example, illustrate the principle of "toxic parenting" through the figure of the stepmother and her relationship with her daughter (Bar, 2019). As we shall see, the mother-daughter relationships in Liebrecht's stories conjure up this archetypal "evil mother" or "stepmother" of the fairy tales, though here they are biological mothers who have deviated from their maternal roles. A turning point in the story plot allows the tyrannical rule of the mother to be challenged.

Just as psychology provides a theoretical framework for understanding the protagonist's character, literature provides insights that can enrich the way we understand psychological disorders. Blumrosen-Sela presents examples of works in which protagonists with personality disorders behave in a manner consistent with psychological models. A striking example of narcissistic personality disorder can be found in Yehoshua Kenaz's novel, *The Great Woman of the Dreams* (Blumrosen-Sela, 2011). Liebrecht's stories add another perspective to this genre in the context of mother-daughter relationships.

The disciplines of psychology and literature are interrelated and mutually enriching. On the one hand, literature can add to our knowledge of mental disorders through the power of description and the use of symbolism, while, on the other hand, psychological theory provides a deeper understanding of the literary work (Blumrosen-Sela, 2017). Indeed, Liebrecht effectively illustrates how a mother's personality disorder profoundly affects her daughter. Our emotional identification with the characters allows us to understand this dynamic experientially. This is the power of literature: unlike abstract theory, literature immerses us in the world of emotions.

LIEBRECHT AND THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN HEBREW LITERATURE

The figure of the mother has been marginalized in world literature for centuries. Mothers were hardly mentioned, except as secondary figures or adulterous women. With the rise of psychoanalysis, motherhood became central to literary discourse. Freudian psychology shattered the patriarchal image of the mother figure by permitting the expression of emotions after many years of their suppression. A rich variety of literary figures of motherhood emerged, presenting varying degrees of emotional ambivalence (Balaban, 2014).

The figure of the mother also underwent significant changes in Hebrew literature. For years the mother had been seen as a victim of a patriarchal culture that imposed unfair expectations upon her. The mother figure was mostly treated as an object, often one who failed to live up to social demands or was not perfectly devoted to her children. For this reason, mothers tend to be described as suffering from separation anxiety as their children grow up or being domineering or neurotic, intrusive, abandoning and even narcissistic (Shiffman, 2017). In the 1990s, writers---especially women writers---began portraying the mother as a subject with legitimate desires and feelings, independent of her children. Despite these changes, the mother as an independent subject, who is only "good enough,"² has had a rather limited place in Hebrew literature (Ginzburg, 2009).

There is an implicit conflict in the concept of the "good enough mother." The process of the mother's attachment to the baby at birth and his development into a separate being is a psychologically complex process. The mother's work is intense and characterized by internal tensions. In Zionist culture, a movement dominated by men, motherhood was not perceived as sufficiently important or interesting to write about. The myth of the "good mother" was shattered in the 1970s and 1980s, first by women poets and then by women novelists (Balaban, 2010). In these decades, feminism provided a framework for looking at the mother as a person--- with dreams, desires and aspirations that were not always related to motherhood and were sometimes in conflict with it. The idea of motherhood as "natural," or taken for granted, was slowly transformed; sometimes it was portrayed as a burden. Tzruya Shalev, Savyon Liebrecht, and Leah Ini were among the writers who created controversial mother figures. This change opened up other possibilities for

representing mother figures. Writers such as Amalia Kahana-Carmon, Ruth Almog, David Grossman and others wrote about "defective" mothers, abusive mothers who did not love their children and repeatedly abandoned them, or mentally unstable mothers (Balaban, 2010).

The daughter's bond with her mother is primary. It forms the basis for all of the relationships she will develop throughout her life; it is the model for positive relationships that she will seek to replicate or disappointing relationships that she will repeatedly try to correct in her relationships with others. The mother-daughter relationship always sustains a tension between intimacy and distance, boundaries and fusion, dependence and independence, similarity and difference, between being open and being closed (Friedman, 2011). In patriarchal culture, the complicated relationship between mothers and their daughters is one of many hidden stories. It was only when women authors began to infiltrate the Israeli literary world in the early 1980s that this relationship surfaced in Hebrew fiction. Even in those years, few works dealt with mother-daughter relationships, and these were mainly focused on descriptions of ambivalence and conflict (Ratuk, 1994). Liebrecht's stories represent the maturation of this trend.

The fear of dealing with mother-daughter relationships has been evident for many years in world literature as well. Here, too, the upheaval that has taken place in recent years can be traced to a feminist approach that brought the preoccupation with mothers and their daughters to the forefront. Women's writing that deals with this relationship is generally presented from the daughter's perspective, revealing complicated and ambivalent interactions. Stereotypical concepts of the "feminine" or the "maternal" are explored even as the daughter tries to break free from the narrative of her mother and discover her independent identity (Ginzburg, 2009).

Liebrecht was among the first Israeli writers to make the relationship of mothers and daughters central, setting this narrative of conflict into various psychological and cultural contexts. The women represent diverse cultural contexts in terms of ethnicity and social background. In this sense, the girls' desire to rebel against their mothers also represents an attempt to break away from social norms that dictate continuity and obedience. What these mothers have in common is their maternal narcissism, whether they are extroverted or introverted. The two daughters must disengage as they attempt to move out of their mothers' orbit and into romantic relationships. We will now delve deeper into the characterization of the relationships of the mothers and daughters in these two

² For the concept of the "good enough mother," see Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1973). The "good enough mother" fulfills her basic role (and may fail at certain aspects) while she can combine attentiveness and sensitivity to the baby while allowing him to spread his wings as he grows older.

stories, using the psychological theory of maternal narcissism as a framework.

Maternal narcissism and the figure of the mother in Liebrecht's stories

Savyon Liebrecht was born in Germany in 1948 to Holocaust survivors as Sabine Sosnowski. She immigrated to Israel with her family at the age of two. She is a graduate of the Department of Philosophy and English Literature at Tel Aviv University, and over the years she has published two novels and eight collections of short stories. A number of her stories have been adapted into plays and films. Her debut collection, *Apples from the Desert*, was warmly received by critics and academics. The story paints a psychological portrait of the protagonists' inner worlds to intensify the narrative conflict (Oren, 1986).

Liebrecht focuses on the relationship between mothers and their daughters in several of her stories. Among these, narcissistic mothers stand out in "Apples from the Desert" and "Crying on the Mother's Shoulder." Liebrecht's mothers exhibit a tension between altruism and self-sacrifice for their children. They also violate social taboos by becoming estrangers to their children (Rodin, 2018). The mothers in Liebrecht's two stories are not only "strangers" to their daughters; they also suffer from maternal narcissism, whose characteristics closely correspond to the narcissistic mother described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In both stories, the family drama develops in a spiral form, rising to a climax and then descending powerfully into a denouement that reveals new insights. In "Crying on Mother's Shoulder," the "dance" between the characters propels the dramatic narrative forward to shatter illusions, while in "Apples from the Desert" it leads to destroying the mother's plan to control her daughter.

Motifs of control and manipulation develop differently in the two stories. Manipulation is defined as "using deception, coercion and trickery, without regard for the interests or needs of those used in the process" (Bowers, 2003, p. 325). One of the key characteristics of narcissistic behavior is the use of manipulation to control the subject. Narcissistic mothers use their daughters in manipulative ways because for them the end justifies the means. When they fail to achieve their goals through manipulation, they blame the child for not satisfying their needs. They tend to convey the message: "my way or the highway." (McBride, 2008, p. 28). They are unable to deal with their feelings.

Liebrecht's stories illustrate how daughters of narcissistic mothers are constantly controlled and

criticized. These mothers are trying to live their lives through the lives of their daughters. They want them to dress and behave like them and make choices according to what they would have chosen for themselves. They are jealous of their daughters and compete with them (Lancer, 2018). They lack boundaries; they are intrusive, domineering and manipulative. Both stories reflect how narcissistic mothers do their best to tie their daughters to them, regardless of the price the daughters will have to pay and the difficulties they will have separating from them (Shiri-Horowitz, 2018).

In "Apples from the Desert," the mother, Victoria Abravanel uses manipulation as a tool to get her daughter to do what she wants. Victoria travels all the way from Jerusalem to Kibbutz Neve Midbar, her mind filled with feverish thoughts. Her rebellious daughter Rivka had left her Jerusalem neighborhood six months earlier to move in with a strange man whom she did not marry. The mother is filled with rage at the daughter for disgracing her family. She comes up with five ideas to force her to return home.

The first option is to speak to her daughter calmly, as if she had nothing against her. "Maybe she would cajole her as if we weren't angry with her, teach her about a girl's honor in a man's eyes, explain sensitive issues, one woman to another" (Liebrecht, 1998). The mother plans to appeal to "common sense" in a friendly way to convince her that she was wrong. She will "explain to her" the issue of woman's modesty, in case she has forgotten. Victoria will treat her like an inexperienced, frivolous girl, who does not understand the codes of religion and family by moving in with a man in the desert. Through this manipulation, she might succeed in convincing her daughter to return to Jerusalem.

The second option: manipulation through cries of grief and an attempt to arouse pangs of conscience about the disgrace she brings to her family: "Or maybe she would start out with cries of despair, shout out her grief, the disgrace that Rivka had brought down on their noble family, shriek like a bereaved mourner until the neighbors heard" (Liebrecht, 1998). This plan includes shouting and shaming the daughter in public. The mother is at the center of the tragic scene, a martyred saint shouting at her rebellious daughter. The price the daughter has to pay is her shaming. She is dragged back to her home in Jerusalem.

The third option: If the previous two methods do not work as expected, Victoria raises the possibility of cleverly isolating and imprisoning her daughter: "Or maybe she would perform her mission stealthily, draw her daughter away from there with false news and then put her in room under lock and key and obliterate all trace of

her. "The mother will make her daughter disappear and thus erase the disgrace that caused her honorable family. The punishment for shaming her family members is to make her disappear if she had never been part of their lives. In this way, the mother can restore her lost honor and maintain the upper hand.

The fourth option includes intimidation and threats. "Or may she would terrify her, tell her about Flora, Yosef Elalouf's daughter, who fell in love with some boy, gave up her virginity for him, and then he deserted her, so she lost her mind and wandered around the streets, pulling little children by the ear" (Liebrecht, 1998). The mother warns her daughter that she could lose her mind because of her forbidden love. That is what would happen if she does not listen to her mother. This situation absolves the mother from responsibility, as her daughter will have "lost her sanity." She will be abandoned and left to wander the streets.

The fifth option: the mother imagines acting violently towards the man who has captured the heart of the rebellious daughter: "she would attack the boy with her nails, rip off his skin and poke out his eyes for what he had done to this change-of-life daughter of hers." "She will throw him out in shame, and her daughter will come back with her to Jerusalem. For so she promised her sister: "I will bring her back even if I have to drag her by the hair." The mother will thus poke the man's eyes out since he blinded her daughter, and she will drag her daughter back to Jerusalem and free her from his control.

These ideas show the increasing degree of manipulation that the mother plans to use. From her perspective, the daughter must return home, hide her head in shame, and accept her parents' judgment. All means are permissible to achieve her goal. In all of these examples, another theme stands out: the daughter's passivity. It seems the mother does not know her daughter at all; certainly, she has no empathy for her needs, desires, or dreams.

A mother's manipulative behavior also appears in the story "Crying on Mother's Shoulder." While in the previous story the manipulation takes place in a single episode, here the manipulative behavior is part of a fixed pattern. Mika is traumatized when she happens to see her husband sitting in a restaurant flirting with a strange woman. Her first instinct is to run to her "protective and supportive" mother. Despite the late hour, Mika decides to travel from Haifa her mother in Eilat. "Mother's shoulder will absorb everything" was a phrase Mika heard many times as a child. In her distress, she seeks someone to affirm her pain, perhaps a hug or a shoulder to lean on. Who but her mother could relieve her pain in difficult

moments? She had heard these words many times but never seemed to stop to see if there was indeed a firm shoulder there for her when she needed it.

During the long trip to Eilat, Mika recalls situations in which her mother fought the education system through various tricks. Mika is an object without presence and lacking in will, and her words go unheard. "In front of the mirror, her mother would glow, reciting her lines like an actress, glancing at her right profile, then her left profile, and then she would try on all her clothes: the dress with an open collar, the buttoned-up dress, a small neck scarf or a hat cocked to one side, with a purse slung over her shoulder or one hanging from her arm" (Liebrecht, 2006, pp. 37-8).

The mother is preparing to put on a "small play," a kind of performance for anyone who defies her wishes or crosses her. The list is long: teachers, a principal, the deputy head of the council, a Social Security official, officials and managers, a burial society man and many others. It turns out that manipulation and performance are a way of life for the mother; this is her way of getting what she wants.

When the mother wants her daughter to start school, she says to the kindergarten teacher: "How can you say that the girl is not progressing like the other children?" She sat on the small child's seat, holding her knees together just like she would in front of the mirror in her bedroom." When the school principal wanted to keep Mika in first grade for another year, the mother tried to flirt with him: "And one year later, in the school principal's room, she sits with her legs crossed and leans forward as she would lean in front of the mirror in her bedroom, but the searing words that poured out of her mouth the night before refused to come out now. Instead, mild words poured out in a pleading melody: 'Maybe we can invite you over to our house'" (Liebrecht, 2006, pp. 37-8).

The mother's manipulateness does not stop in her conversations with her daughter either. The mother ignores her daughter's desires, needs and abilities, and convinces her that her real strength is her mother and not herself because she "always knows how to handle the battles of life." She adds: "In good times and bad times. Mother's shoulder, I already told you once, is always there for you." Is that so? Does she really know her daughter, or is the daughter an object on which the mother projects her emotions?

The mother gives false, manipulative answers to hide her true motives. When asked to describe her relationship with her deceased husband, the mother answered that there was "great love" between them. Mika replies with a painful sentence: "So why did I think he

was not important to you at all? You hardly talked about him." The mother responds evasively: "After he died, he was not important. I had a girl who needed my all." Was that so? The girl was a weak excuse for the fact that the mother did not care about the father. Mika responded: "'It's terrible how you say that he was not important after he died, it's really inhuman.'" (Liebrecht, 2006, p. 40). This statement marks the moment of Mika's disillusionment and her ability to express opposition and criticism towards her mother.

Was the father important to the mother when he was alive? Why does she not tell Mika about him? Why does she not talk to her about longing or pain, or about any emotion at all? Instead, the mother replies to Mika that "humanity and strength do not go together," and that the most important thing for her is "to be strong." There are no real answers to the daughter's difficult questions. The mother's message is that you can either be human or strong. By being strong the mother justifies not being human: to avoid relating to her daughter's feelings, not to be empathetic, not to see her weaknesses and strengths, not to see her as she is.

When the daughter doubts the mother's love for her dead father, the mother says, "'I did not want anyone after him, if that is what you are asking. I loved him like you love Reuben.'" The daughter replies sharply: "What do you know about me and Reuben? You see us twice a year." Her mother says: "It takes one moment to know everything. Take good care of him." When the daughter reminds her mother how she hated Reuben when they first met, the mother replies: "He was too beautiful. A man should not be so beautiful ...'" (Liebrecht, 2006, p. 40). The mother hides her jealousy of her daughter who fell in love with a handsome man who loved her in return. She goes on to tell her of Errol Flynn and his wives, who she says "'were all miserable. A man's beauty brings more trouble than a woman's ugliness. But with you I see it's fine. And there's something in you too.'"

What is that "something" in her daughter that she is alluding to? The alienated mother tells her daughter that she is a combination of her dead father and her grandfather: " 'Your father's personality and your grandfather's humor. You got nothing from me.'" The daughter found a handsome man whom her mother thought she did not deserve. Mika resembles her father and grandfather, and in this context, the father's good character and the grandfather's sense of humor are noted, but apparently, neither one was handsome. Therefore, why should her daughter Mika be worthy of a handsome man if she was not attractive? The mother does not give her daughter any credit, and certainly does not flatter her. The

mother can only experience separateness with her daughter when she views her as a competitor: "she got nothing from her."

THE MOTHER'S LACK OF EMPATHY - WITH AND WITHOUT AN AUDIENCE

Empathy is defined as the ability to see the other through their eyes, and even to share their feelings. As noted, one of the salient features of narcissistic mothers is their inability to empathize with their daughters (Burton, 2015). They do not affirm their daughters' feelings, and as a result, the girls feel insignificant. In many cases the girls repress their emotions as they cause endless pain; they are either ignored or met with criticism (Martinez-Lewi, 2013). From a young age, daughters of narcissistic mothers learn that outward appearances are more important than feelings. They learn to numb their emotions, because if they do not feel they cannot be hurt. Narcissistic mothers do not know their daughters. They construct an image of them that is a projection of the mother's feelings (Lancer, 2018). These principles are evident in Liebrecht's stories.

In the story "Crying on Mother's Shoulder," the mother tries to convince the vice-principal of the school that he should promote her daughter to second grade because she knows how to read and write. Although Mika prefers to stay back a grade, her mother scolds her and decides what is good for her. After working her charms on the school principal, she walks home with her daughter. Her ingratiating attitude towards the vice-principal turns into anger directed at her daughter, who does not live up to the mother's expectations: "And all the way back home, frowning into the green neck scarf: 'Why are you walking like that, Mika? Hurry up and stand up straight. You don't walk that way in the street. When you are in the street you always need to walk straight... We will show them how smart you are and how much you know. We'll sit together and read every day now. We'll sit together after your cocoa and you will know the most. What do you mean?!' She stopped like a horse rising on its hind legs from the force of momentum, 'what do you mean you want to stay in first grade? You never go backward in life [...] you have a mother who knows how to handle the battles of life'" (Liebrecht, 2006, pp. 37-8).

The mother has made a plan for her daughter, and she must adapt herself to her mother's needs. She urges her to stand up straight, show resilience and dignity and be successful so that her mother will look good. The situation is so painful that the daughter is forced to disconnect from her feelings. Her mother's face looks to Mika like it is trapped in a web of wrinkles (a detail reminiscent of the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers, like *Snow White* and

Cinderella). The story ends with the daughter's seemingly trivial reporting: "We are going to London," a statement that has no hint of the underlying emotional turmoil, pain, disappointment, or loss of innocence. The daughter's announcement of a planned trip to a distant place is indeed an expression of her disconnection and a challenge to her mother's authority, yet it is reported in a matter-of-fact, detached manner.

THOUGHT PATTERNS: FIXED AND EVOLVING

In both stories it is evident that the mother's pattern of thinking does not evolve, in contrast to the daughter's thought pattern which undergoes a process of transformation, developing into a sense of disillusionment and even rebellion against the mother. The narcissistic mother does not know her daughter as she is but sees her solely as a tool for her own needs. In the mother's pattern of thinking, which remains unchanged, the daughter remains an object, as her mother focuses on "how things look" and not "how one feels."

In "Apples from the Desert," narcissism hides behind a sense of disgrace that the daughter inflicts on her parents by flouting cultural-religious conventions. They expected their daughter, Rivka, to marry the man her parents had chosen for her, and to continue the traditions into which she was born. But by defying these conventions, her fate is to return to the autocratic culture in which she grew up, regardless of the price she has to pay. The mother's plan to drag Rivka back is driven by her need to be at the center. When Victoria sees her daughter, she is not even able to even identify her.

The mother's plan goes awry. Rivka's hair, which the mother planned to pull, is too short, and a large man with orange hair protects the daughter. Victoria must find a new plan that will maintain her centrality, given that she is unable to drag Rivka back. On her way back to Jerusalem, she fabricates the cover story she will tell her husband and sister after failing to complete the mission. She will present Rivka to her sister, Sarike, as someone who has "no beauty no grace, no intelligence or talent" and as a girl "as tall as Og, King of Bashan" who has finally found a mate. She will persuade the sister not to say anything to the husband or others and again puts herself at the center: "Sarike, we've spent our lives alone, you without a husband and me with one. My little daughter taught me something. Andus, remember how we used to think she was a bit backward; God forbid? How I used to cry over her?" Victoria also distracts her husband: "You don't have to worry about Rivka. She's happy there, thank God" (Liebrecht, 2000). She would tempt him by telling him the story of the apples from the desert, dipped in honey.

In both situations Victoria's attitude to Rivka does not change: she remains an object. In contrast to her mother, Rivka took her fate into her own hands and went to the desert with her partner, Dubi, in search of happiness. She is transformed from a woman of no beauty, no grace, no intelligence or talent" to an independent woman. Rivka has this to say about the man her mother has chosen for her, whom she presents as a "genius": "pale, sick genius, like he sits in a pit all day. And anyway, I don't love him." Rivka chooses to love. She chooses to stop being an object and move forward with confidence to fulfill her desires. Her decision to choose life and separate from her mother is a defiant stance in which she disobeys her mother's narcissistic dictates.

The story "Crying on Mother's Shoulder" describes a mother who does not bother to understand her daughter's feelings and desires. Mika has a defined role: to represent her mother. Mika is supposed to look good when she and her mother are away from home, as a child and as an adult. She must convey that she is an excellent student, pleasant-looking, but not too pretty (so as not to overshadow the mother), that she married the right man, even though he is "too handsome for her," and especially "that everything is fine." This means that Mika has to hold back her tears, certainly from the neighbors' eyes. As the story unfolds, she comes to realize that there is no mother's shoulder to lean on and that the mother is not interested in knowing "how it feels" but only "how it looks".

The mother's thought pattern remains fixed throughout the story, while Mika's thinking regarding her relationship with her mother undergoes a transformation. She comes to understand something she had never known: the shoulder she had been promised her whole life had never been there at all. When she arrives in Eilat, Mika looks at her mother and sees an old woman; she appears weak, her body seems small. What she always thought had radiated strength and determination, was transformed into a weak, thin shoulder. Mika realizes for the first time that there is no one to lean on: "Taking one step after her mother, Mika noticed that her height had diminished since she had last seen her, her shoulder blades had become rounded behind her neck, they swallowed her neck inside her body, and her shoulders seemed fragile. Mother moved carefully as if she knew that if she were to fall all her bones would be crushed. Mika's eyes were drawn to the fingers of her mother's hands, which shook as she walked, they were as transparent and thin as a child's." (Liebrecht, 2006). Mika keeps her pain to herself, choosing finally not to share it with her mother, and invents a story about the reason she came to Eilat.

Near the end, the following lines appear: "Mika took a deep breath, as if in an instant, as if time sped up and she was pulled out of her life, and suddenly Reuben, her mother and all the plots of Napoleon were visible to her from a distance." (Liebrecht, 2006, pp. 44-45). In one night, Mika compresses a process of years to shake off the trauma that had shaken her world. She emerges from her "old skin" and enters her new, clear-eyed self, listening to her heart and believing the sight of her eyes instead of empty, meaningless words. Only when daughters of narcissistic mothers go through a process of disillusionment and face the gap between "what they were told" and what they experienced can they fully understand what they have gone through. Perhaps only then can they act authentically. Mika goes through such a process: outwardly she appears to be the "old Mika," but deep down she no longer responds to the psychological dictates that conditioned her personality for years and blindly imprisoned her emotions. This seems to be the starting point of her new life.

SUMMARY

The characteristics of maternal narcissism reflected in the two stories presented above explain the "maternal alienation" that Rodin (2018) discussed. However, Liebrecht depicts more than "maternal alienation;" she represents an incurable borderline personality disorder that narcissistic mothers know how to hide from society. It decisively affects their daughters, who are born and raised as objects (Masterson, 1993). These girls are so used to the fact that no one is interested in their feelings, thoughts or desires, that it takes a very great effort for them to change. Daughters of narcissistic mothers become subjects only when they follow their hearts or manage to see through the lies, stories, coverups, and indoctrination into which they were born. They pay a heavy price for this disillusionment, as it is bound up with disconnecting from and rebelling against the mother.

Liebrecht's protagonists, Rivka and Mika, learn that they must stand up and take action. There is no one to guide them or support them. Rivka finds her way as she rebels against the values with which she grew up. She understands that if she stays home in Jerusalem, she will be married off to someone she does not love. The fixation of "what everyone else thinks of her" could suspend her in this frame of mind forever. Rivka finds strength through love. She gets up and leaves her home and her old ways, and turns to the dry, desert filled with Dubi's love. This allows her to be her true self in a way that expresses authenticity and strength. Her mother will not succeed in

moving her off her path even if she manages to perform all the deeds she had planned to bring her back.

Mika, who left Eilat and built an independent life for herself in Haifa, grew up hearing deceptive words: "Always remember that Mother is your best friend. No need to worry when Mother is around. And if you need Mother's shoulder, no matter where you are, Mother will always give you her shoulder." In reality, her mother turns her back on her and does not extend her shoulder. Mika finally realizes that there is no shoulder to lean on and that there never was. Only the indoctrination remained. One can only wonder: does the partner she has chosen replicate what she learned at home--- that she is unworthy and will never be worthy of love--- or is this a real turning point for her?

REFERENCES

- [1] American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- [2] Balaban, A. (2010). *Nine mothers and a mother*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
- [3] Balaban, A. (2014). *Conflicted motherhood: mothers and motherhood in modern Hebrew fiction*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
- [4] Bar, D. (2019). *The silent abuse*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
- [5] Bettelheim, B. & Ekstein, R. (1994). *1990 Freud's Vienna and Other Essays*. Knopf.
- [6] Blumrosen-Sela, S. (2011). The relationship between literature and psychoanalysis after Aharon Meged's "Flies". *Kivunim Hadashim* 24, 253-265.
- [7] Blumrosen-Sela, S. (2017). *Personality disorders in Israeli literature*. Resling (Hebrew).
- [8] Bowers, L. (2003). Manipulation: description, identification and ambiguity. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 10 (3), 323-328. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2850.2003.00602.x>
- [9] Burton, N. (2015). Empathy vs. Sympathy. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201505/empathy-vs-sympathy>
- [10] Coetzee J.M. & Kurtz, A. (2015). *The good story: Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychotherapy*. Viking.
- [11] Donaldson-Pressman, S. & Pressman, R. M. (1997). *The Narcissistic family: diagnosis and treatment*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- [12] Friedman, A. (2011). *Mothers and daughters: an entangled relationship*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
- [13] Freud, S. (1991). On narcissism: An introduction. In Sandler, J., Spector, E. & Fonagy, P. (Eds.), *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction"* (pp. 3-32). Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429475047_1
- [14] Ginzburg, R. (2009) "Mothers and Daughters in the world of fiction." In Perroni, E. (Ed.), *Motherhood*:

- Psychoanalysis and other disciplines* (pp. 116-132). Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad(Hebrew).
- [15] Herzig, H. (2005). *Literary and cultural theory*. The Open University (Hebrew).
- [16] Kenaz, Y. (1986). *The Great Woman of the Dreams*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad(Hebrew).
- [17] Kernberg, O. F. (1985). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. Aronson.
- [18] Lancer, D. (2018). Daughters of narcissistic mothers. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/narcissism>.
- [19] Liebrecht, S. (1998). *Apples from the desert*. The Feminist Press at CUNY (English edition).
- [20] Liebrecht, S. (2006). *On Love Stories and Other Endings*. Keter. (Hebrew)
- [21] Lester, D. (2019). Theories of Personality. In: *Theories of Personality*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429026027>
- [22] Luo Y.L.L.&Cai H. (2018). The Etiology of Narcissism: A Review of Behavioral Genetic Studies. In Hermann, A. D., Brunell, A. B.,& Foster, J. D. (Eds.), *Handbook of Trait Narcissism* (pp. 149–156). Springer International Publishing AG.
- [23] Määttä, M. et al. (2020). “She does not control me anymore but I can hear her voice sometimes” -A phenomenographic research on the resilience perceptions of children who have survived from upbringing by a narcissistic parent. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 6(12), 17-40.
- [24] Martinez-Lewi, L. (2013). *Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers – Give to Yourself*. *Psychology Today*. 13–15. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/toxic-relationships/201802/daughters-narcissistic-mothers>
- [25] Masterson. (1993). *The Emerging Self*. Brunner/Mazel.
- [26] Masterson, J. F. (2013). *Treatment of the borderline adolescent: A Developmental approach*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203776216>
- [27] McBride, K. (2008). *Will I ever be good enough? Healing the daughters of narcissistic mothers*. Atria.
- [28] Olmert, D. (2018). *A Barricade of mothers: Mothers of soldiers in Israeli Zionist culture and literature*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad(Hebrew).
- [29] Ovid. (1881). *Metamorphosis*. Harvard University Press.
- [30] Preston. (2016). 10 Signs of a Narcissistic Parent. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/communication-success/201602/10-signs-narcissistic-parent>.
- [31] Ratok, I. (1994). *The other voice*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad(Hebrew).
- [32] Rudin, S. Strangers at Home: Mothers detached from their children in the literary work of Savyon Liebrecht. *Hemdat* 11(1), 1-32 (Hebrew).
- [33] Shenhav, Y. & Hever, H. (2002). The Post-Colonial Perspective. *Theory and Criticism* 20, 9-14 (Hebrew).
- [34] Shiffman, S. (2017). *Committed*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad(Hebrew).
- [35] Shiri Horowitz, R. (2018). *It's just your imagination*. Barnir (Hebrew).
- [36] Winnicott, D. W. (1995). *Playing and Reality*. Am Oved (Hebrew).